Two Translations of a Poem from the Old Irish

Pangur Bán

This poem was found in the margins of a manuscript in the Monastery of St Paul, Carinthia, Austria. It seems to have been written by an Irish monk, sometime around the ninth century.

Click here for the Old Irish text

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"The Scholar and the Cat"  "From the Irish of Pangur Ban"

by Frank O'Connor  by Eavan Boland

Each of us pursues his trade,  Myself and Pangur, cat and sage
I and Pangur my comrade,  Go each about our business;
His whole fancy on the hunt,  I harass my beloved page,
And mine for learning ardent.  He his mouse.

More than fame I love to be  Fame comes second to the peace
Among my books and study,  Of study, a still day
Pangur does not grudge me it,  Unenvying, Pangur's choice
Content with his own merit.  Is child's play.

When a heavenly time! we are  Neither bored, both hone
In our small room together  At home a separate skill
Each of us has his own sport  Moving after hours alone
And asks no greater comfort.  To the kill

While he sets his round sharp eye  When at last his net wraps
On the wall of my study  After a sly fight
I turn mine, though lost its edge,
On the great wall of knowledge.

Now a mouse drops in his net
After some mighty onset
While into my bag I cram
Some difficult darksome problem.

When a mouse comes to the kill
Pangur exults, a marvel!
I have when some secret's won
My hour of exultation.

Though we work for days and years
Neither the other hinders;
Each is competent and hence
Enjoys his skill in silence.

Master of the death of mice,
He keeps in daily practice,
I too, making dark things clear,
Am of my trade a master.

Around a mouse; mine traps
Sudden insight.

On my cell wall here,
His sight fixes, burning,
Searching; my old eyes peer
At new learning,

And his delight when his claws
Close on his prey
Equals mine when sudden clues
Light my way.

So we find by degrees
Peace in solitude,
Both of us, solitaries,
Have each the trade

He loves: Pangur, never idle
Day or night
Hunts mice; I hunt each riddle
From dark to light.

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